

Healing from Above?

Order of St John, St Paul's Cathedral

Saturday 20 June 2009

Being here in the middle of London, I feel at home. I was born in London and for nearly six years I lived right in the centre at Lambeth Palace, working for the Archbishop of Canterbury. People loved coming to see us there and one Saturday my sister and brother-in-law came with their children. I took them into Lollards Tower, famous for prisoners, torture and ghosts. My brother-in-law, being tidy minded, shut the door behind us. Unfortunately there was no way of opening it again. We were prisoners in the tower! What could we do? There was no telephone. I got out on to the roof, walked to the other end where there was a flat for the Archbishop's Secretary and furtively knocked on her window hoping she was not in the bath. She let me in and I released the other prisoners.

Roofs can be helpful. I know that since for two months now our house has been encased with scaffolding as they have replaced our roof. At Lambeth the roof saved me from captivity. In our second reading, the roof was literally 'a life-saver'. Jesus was called to heal a paralysed man, but he could not get the man past the crowds. So, instead they took the tiles off the roof and lowered him down on his bed.

Jesus and Palestine are a good place to begin today. The Order of St John began in Jerusalem in Palestine. The Knights Hospitallers set up some of the earliest infirmaries, hospitals. Healing was the art they encouraged. Still today there is St John's Eye Hospital in Jerusalem, run by the Order. It does wonderful work and is one of the places where Jews and Palestinians and others work together and are healed together. So healing has been part of the Christian story from the beginning.

But how does healing, medical care, first-aid and nursing work now? Well, to begin with, it's not quite like the Gospel story. Often it involves the most up-to-date technology. My favourite tale involving technology is of Richard Hammond and the Air Ambulance. You'll all know Richard Hammond from *Top Gear* on the television. You younger ones will know him too from television, from *Richard Hammond's Blast Lab*.

On 20 September 2006, nearly three years ago, Richard was at RAF Elvington – not far from where I live; it's nearby to York. He was driving a jet-powered car, *Vampire Dragster*. It was a remarkable car – it could go up to 370 miles per hour. Richard achieved an unofficial record of nearly 315 miles per hour that day. Then disaster struck. At 288 miles per hour, a tyre blew out and the car overturned and crashed. Before it crashed Richard was still being dragged along with his helmet scraping the ground at 215 miles an hour.

Somehow he survived but after the crash he was a hair's breadth of losing his life. He was only saved by the immediate appearance of the Air Ambulance. It whisked Richard up and took him to Leeds General Infirmary. There the doctors and nurses saved his life. So now, of course, he's back on *Top Gear* and the *Blast Lab*. It's an amazing story. But what I've missed out in the story is the people. The Air Ambulance would not be there without huge amounts of fund-raising. Hundreds, even thousands of people raise that money, and they do it all for nothing. Sometimes the Air Ambulance will whisk people up from car racing meetings – at Silverstone or Brands Hatch. Who else is there to help? It is the Order of St John, St John's Ambulance. Football matches, concerts, race meetings, county shows, almost every work place – none of these could happen without St John's Ambulance. It's all done for nothing too. They are all volunteers.

Why do they do it? Where did it all begin? That brings us back full circle to those men with the paralysed man on the roof. They too wanted him healed. They too gave their time – so did Jesus. In Jesus we see it most vividly of all. He gave his life to heal us – to heal us from sickness, from conflict, from anger, from selfishness. In the end he even gave his *life* for our healing. St John's Ambulance, the Order of St John, and today's great service takes us to the heart of healing and at the same time into the heart of God.

Amen.

Readings:

Acts 10. 36-43

Luke 5. 17-26